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ABSTRACT

College composition instructors need special knowledge and skills in teaching black students. After pointing out the difference between black dialect and standard English, teachers need to discuss with students the practical reasons for using standard English in writing. To avoid being arbitrary or patronizing during this discussion, instructors must understand the implications of several current models for the standard English-black dialect relationship--the cognitive deficit, culturally deprived, and bidialectical theories. They must also be concerned with their approach and the course content. In addition to providing strong classroom leadership and working on individual writing problems, instructors must encourage students' pride in their work by setting high standards. For further ideas and strategies, instructors can consult a number of source books, including: G. Smitherman's "Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black Dialect America," J.L. Dillard's "Lexicon of Black English," and P. Stoller's "Black American English." (MM)

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Teaching Writing to Minority Students

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This paper attempts to deal with teaching college composition to blacks, with an honest endeavour to project a practical and pleasant way of dealing with controversial issues, namely college composition and black English.

The linguistic system of working class blacks has been referred to as black English. However, Paul Stoller has used the term to describe the linguistic system of all blacks in a given community (1975). Orlando Taylor suggests that black English be viewed in a broader perspective. He has classified black speech as a function of education and formality. Thus one could hear black speech and describe it as any one of the following: educated formal, educated informal, uneducated formal, or uneducated informal (1973).

There are many theories advocated about the teaching of college composition and black English. Some of these are: the cognitive deficit theory, the culturally deprived theory, and the bi-dialectal theory. College instructors of minority students should consider one or two of these theories so that the instructor may understand the problems involved with teaching minority students and find workable solutions to them.

The college composition teacher must be aware of the proposed "cognitive deficit" theory. As explained by Bereiter and Englesmann, this theory brands blacks with "verbal deprivation" and they are treated as inferior as if they have no language of their own (1966). In essence, these theorists work toward a complete doing away with black dialect, and view it as a deficient form of English. Smitherman explains that black English is viewed as an "underdeveloped version of standard English" and a "non-logical mode of expressive behaviour," lacking the "formal properties" necessary for the formulation of cognitive concepts. The linguistic concepts found wanting in black English, so we are told, are the concepts of negation and plurality" (1977).

This theory is unfair because it arrives at a conclusion from the premise that black dialect is not a vital part of the English patterns of black students. Blacks, who speak and write their dialect, are perfectly aware of its implications for their own-kind. However, since they are also aware that the same speech and writing creates problems for their anglo counterparts, they hope that they are not labeled "ignorant" or "verbally" deprived because of these dialectical patterns. The example of black English, "I asked did he want to go," is considered incorrect by the standard English version: I asked him, if he would go." In their evaluation of the black student and English, the cognitive theorists are hasty: Bernstein writes that "They do not consider the code used by the speaker of black English vernacular to be functionally adequate or structurally systemative" (1961). Cognitive theorists do not recognize that black dialect is genuine with its own vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. This unfairness is best illustrated by Baratz and Baratz when they explain that the cognitive theorist labels Negro dialect as "poorly learned English" (1970).

It behooves the instructor of blacks in a college composition course to be aware of this theory and avoid the pitfalls set forth by the cognitive theorists. If instructors analyze this theory carefully, they will avoid jumping to hasty conclusions about their black students, and any functional conflicts between lecturer and student can be prepared for and avoided.

Another school of thought sees black language and culture as being different but deficient. This school believes that the English spoken and written by black composition students is the result of archaic rural Southernisms. It is not uncommon to have these theorists label black students as "culturally deprived."

This theory presents a contradiction, since the heritage and culture of black people are as ancient, rich and well documented as those of standard English speakers. The wrong done to black students by these theorists is to label black students culturally deprived because they do not know as much about the culture and economic status of middle or upper class non-blacks. Blacks are looked on as deprived because they live in ghettos or inner cities, and hence they do not have the opportunities to be exposed to Anglo arts, music and social life, and hence their inability to write and speak as well as or "as good" as the rest of a white society. Because of poor family life and economic conditions, these black people are assumed to be deprived culturally, and hence it is implied that this results in their inability to speak, write, and use the "proper" type of English. It is not obvious to these theorists that the black student may be trying, through his or her writing and speech, to preserve legitimate African ancient roots. To label a

cultural group (blacks) "culturally deprived" based on socio-economics and values of predominantly Anglo-American society is not sound theory.

It should be remembered, that some social theorists hypothesize that the transference of a culturally deprived child to a culturally enriched home could enhance the deprived child's achievement and alleviate many of the problems faced by the child. I wonder. Would the results be a dramatic change for the better? Would better writing occur, coupled with instant A's?

Theorists who support the idea of cultural deprivation, acknowledge that black dialect and English are linguistically systemative, and that the speakers of black English do well in their own communities. However, the catch here is the demand for language uniformity for blacks in a white world and, as Smitherman explains, blacks need "to switch language in speech and writing in order to conform as situations warrant it" (1977).

It is difficult for black college students to walk in for a job interview and "rap" with the employer in a relaxed and natural manner. If the black wants the job and if he or she intends to make a good impression, the switch from black English to standard is a must. Few employers tolerate black vernacular. Similarly in its written form, many black students are going to be uneasy when they are asked to express themselves freely. When asked to write a paragraph on why they would like a particular job, intuition tells them to write, "I would prefer to work for your company because I have the skills to be of service to you, and the salary you pay is fair and attractive." (The flip side is to be relaxed and say: "I'd love to work here cause I can be the best and I like the way you pay us.") Further proof of the necessity of a language switch is evidenced in college entrance exams, in schools where high grades are sought, and in awards and even scholarships. This switch from black English to standard English frequently is necessary if you want to succeed in an Anglo-Americanized society, but unnecessary, and even frowned upon, if you want to be with the brotherhood. The bottom line in the switch is to avoid being labeled "slow" and being shipped to a speech therapist for lessons in language improvement or development.

Finally, instructors of college composition for minorities should analyze the implications of the "bi-dialectal" theory. Being aware of what this theory describes is important for better pedagogical preparation and instruction. Smitherman explains that the bi-dialectal theorist thinks that "since the white middle class writer cannot or will not accept the dialect of blacks, then blacks must accept and learn to use the dialect of white middle class." However, bi-dialectal theorists are not as radical as Smitherman states. They tend to understand

that the total adaptation discussed by Smitherman in which blacks must adapt to white English is not total nor a fundamental requirement. Bi-dialectalists feel that:

a. The dividing line between language and dialect is not absolute. (Dillard, 1972)
b. Language facility and competence should be looked at from social function. This emphasis is especially important in studying the language function of black Americans, since it requires the interpreter/instructor to refer observed differences in phonology, morphology, syntax and function to their source of cultural experience. (Hall & Freedle, 1975).
c. Pluralistic ignorance which prevails in instruction arises from the instructor not knowing that the student's dialect is different from the instructor's own and the students do not know how the teacher's system differs from theirs. (Labov, 1972).

The idealogy of the bi-dialectalists is based on a better understanding of standard English and black English, that gives the instructor of black students in a college composition class an avenue for working toward understanding, and creating an environment of stable instruction and learning.

The cognitive deficit theory, the culturally deprived theory, and the bi-dialectal theory are harsh when viewed from the Anglo point of view; to the instructor of minority students, these theories should be an avenue of understanding a difficult cultural and pedogogical situation. The instructor of college composition for blacks should see that language is not the only problem: deeper down is the issue of culture. Thus, one answer to teaching blacks is to understand the issue of culture and language and these in turn will be a stepping stone to success.

Theories lead to questions about implementation, and a question that should be asked is: Does there really exist a difference in teaching writing to minority students--especially blacks? The answer is Yes. There are different problems that arise when teaching college composition to minority students. These problems lie not in pedagogy but in the understanding of the approach. And this is troublesome because of a lack of knowledge about black culture. Ralph Linton an anthropologist has stated: "Those who know no culture other than their own cannot know their own." Due to ignorance and an innate fear of the black race, instructors feel that their approach should be a "watering down" of the essentials in the writing process, preferential treatment, and allowances made for error. But this is not the norm followed for the approach to non-blacks. To repeat, there is a different approach to teaching

college composition to minority students and it lies in the approach.

No matter how we approach writing, it is imperative to know that all black students can write. My theory is that black students must be shown the difference in the use of dialect and standard English. They must also be shown in a non-arbitrary manner why what they write is incorrect. It is important to discuss the comparative usage of standard English and dialect (black), with black students. This theory calls for dialogue. Talking down to minority students only frustrates them and gives rise to negative feelings toward the subject matter and the instructor. Demanding the use of standard forms is also a negative approach, as it projects a feeling of Anglo supremacy. What is needed is an understanding of the students during the writing process. An explanation of the problems associated with the writing process, and a solution to the problems of the writing process is urged. Encourage the black student to see how the learning of the difference between the standard forms and non-standard forms has its value within the writing process. An illustration of transference into other fields of education and work can be profitable.

The pedagogy of teaching writing to minority students calls for understanding, education (on the part of the instructor), and dialogue. If these are put into action, positive results will follow. I feel as Malcomb X:

> Understanding is brought about through dialogue. Dialogue is the communication of ideas that can only be brought about when you can speak a common language that others can understand.

Any instructor who prejudges or misunderstands the language or ability of black students to write and speak a common language as their Anglo counterparts, will find an obstacle course of barriers and problems.

So, if there is a difference in teaching minority students college composition, what is this difference? Smitherman suggests that "The crucial difference in American culture lies in the contrasting modes in which blacks and white Americans have shaped that language...a written mode for white, having come from a European, print-oriented culture; a spoken mode for blacks, having come from an African, orally oriented background. Oral tradition is part of the cultural baggage the African (black) brought to America." This is in essence the understanding of what black English writing is about, and this avenue of understanding and study should be pursued by the instructor of college composition who wishes to instruct minorities.

Being aware that there is a difference in the pedagogy of teaching writing to minority students, it is vital to find practical methods of instruction. I have found that there are a variety of practical methods available for an instructor of college composition who teaches black students. The success of these methods, depends on how they are applied to actual learning situations. The best methods I have used may be divided into approach and content. These methods are valuable and successful, and what follows is an attempt to explain how they work for me.

The approach of the instructor to the writing process is important. Minority students are aware that the instructor's assignment to teach the class is a challenge. They look for leadership. Leadership is not only expected, but also required in order to successfully teach minority students. Having been told what to do since grade school, black college composition students expect the same treatment at the college level. (They can work without being told, but they need encouragement to boost their self-confidence). Black students look for the instructor to lead them through the intricacies and pitfalls of the writing process, so that they in turn may gain self-confidence and writing security.

Instructors cannot be totally subject oriented. They must be problem solvers and tuned into the specific needs of individual students. It is beneficial if the instructor is not totally immersed in teaching the subject matter of rhetoric, essay writing, or the research paper. Break from routine and see how your minority students are doing. Should they have problems with organization, restructuring, or rewriting, the instructor must deal with those problems and help the student find solutions to the writing process to make it enjoyable. If Tequira writes well, but in a disorganized manner, the instructor should take the time to address Tequira's individual needs whether in a class conference or in an appointed office conference.

Success depends on the instructor's ability to emphasize the importance of mastering the process of composing. Herein lies the foundation of the successful writer. Students are taught to write, to write and communicate, and rewrite and communicate. While minority students are learning this task, the instructor illustrates the value and practicality that comes with doing this task well, and the benefits that accrue when these writing skills are transfered to other related fields of study. To quote Donald Murray:

> There is no way we can tell what our students will need to write in their lives beyond the classroom, but we can give our students a successful experience writing (1980).

Writing requires discipline, and when teaching minority students, it is important for the instructor to set a standard. This standard is to re-inforce the idea of pride and the role of leadership. Requiring only the student's best efforts and products is not too demanding. Keep the student aware of set-backs by conferencing and advice; encourage minority students to be proud and efficient in their speech and writing. Use the idea of self respect and pride to challenge their best writing abilities. If the instructor's attitude reflects these ideals, students will attune themselves to doing what is asked--their best. Dare students to succeed no matter how remiss their writing forms may be. When students know there is hope, they are remarkably generous in their response to subject matter and their instructor.

Practical methods in helping to teach black students also involve content. The question of mechanics or grammar has always been seen as the prime obstacle of minority writing problems. Unfortunately, it has also been used as the prime solution. Mechanics is just a code to be used with a minimum amount of drill and a maximum amount of "show and tell" when the situation warrants. Through conferencing, students are not taught the complete jargon of Warriner's, but rather they are shown errors as they occur, within the context of their own language.

Active methods of writing are very practical in teaching writing to minority students. Active means doing. The best results in class are obtained as students work on the writing process. Time blocks are arranged for writing in class in a variety of forms: description, personal writing, journal, points of view, and more. Writings are rehearsed and shared in class for peer criticism. Papers are then re-edited, re-written, and read aloud. From each other's active methods of writing, black students are able to find areas of weakness and strength, areas of improvement, and areas that require help from the instructor.

Enphasis on finding errors or weaknesses is important to black students, having been told from grades 1-12 that they were writing incorrectly, poorly, and with "so many errors" that it lowers confidence. However, in a college composition class the errors are not to be used as symbols of ignorance, inadequacy or culture deprivation. They are, instead, to be used to show patterns in their errors, and therefore as clues to how improvement can take place.

When students reach obstacles in writing, they can be given models to help them visualize how a particular type of writing reads when finished. The model approach is an excellent tool of active writing, as it stimulates the "exploratory stages" in the minority student's writing processes. It gets

students to imitate the models and then to produce as an individual. Caution must be used in the selection of models. The best and most effective models are well written student papers and essays, and brief paragraphs and essays by prominent blacks (Baldwin, King, Rosa Parks, Nikki Giovanni, Langston Hughes).

Another valuable approach in teaching minority students the skills of college composition is the writing inventory list. Sources for meaningful assignment lists may be found in the minority student's community and the people who govern that community or help it. Culture provides a wealth of information...customs, social life, music, and songs. Not to be forgotten is "soul"... its history and implications for blacks. Poetry, gospel music and drama are fertile sources of meaningful writing assignments. These sources are ideal for the student and instructor, because their help will produce and improve students' writing techniques, and this makes for meaningful writing tasks.

Individualizing instruction has been a rewarding and profitable method for me, in my teaching of black students. Office time is given to the student to express concerns, frustrations and problems with writing assignments and the writing process. The instructor uses this time to listen, instruct, and guide the student to self confidence and self-help. Conferencing is also used to help the student explain points of contention or changes made in the rewrite of a final paper. The objective of this method is not to baby or patronize the student, but rather to nurture talents that may be hidden during a classroom work session. It is also a major step to building the student's confidence.

No teaching method would be worthwhile if there wasn't an evaluation of its effectiveness. Thus, the instructor needs feedback. In an evaluative form created by the instructor, the instructor should find out from students how effective teaching methods, assignments, teaching materials and texts really are. The instructor should seek departmental help in working with negative evaluations, so that future classes may be more effective.

The teaching of college composition to minority students may appear a tough assignment for an English instructor. It is not my intention to leave the reader without ideas or resources from which to draw helpful ideas for teaching. I have found a wealth of knowledge in the sources I have used, and a review of some successful sources that have helped me as a teacher of college composition for black students seems in order.

A valuable source book is Dr. Geneva Smitherman's book

Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America. (Boston, 1970. Houghton Mifflin). In this book Dr. Smitherman gives an introduction and history of black English structure. She also discusses and illustrates the sounds and structure of present day black English, black modes of discourse, and black-white language attitudes. She concludes her book with appendices on black proverbs, sayings and semantics. The book is quite controversial. Smitherman is sharply critical of the bi-dialectical theorist calling them "deficient and rejectionist of Afro-American language and culture." She also believes there is a radical difference between teaching college composition to blacks and to anglos.

Eugene B. McCoy's copyrighted manuscript entitled Understanding Through Awareness, is an excellent materials publication. The manuscript deals with problems that face instructors of English as they work to teach writing to blacks. McCoy sets forth ideas for a personal rapport between student and instructor and advice on the avoidance of "double standards and anarchy in the classroom." The book also helps the instructor understand the language and cultured patterns of the ghetto and inner city, so that stereotyping and non-communication between teacher and student can be avoided. The manuscript also projects how the use of black heritage and music, song and church, may be used as practical pedagogical tools for writing instruction. This book helps the reader in analysis of the cognitive deficit and culturally deprived theories, as it helps the instructor see black language and culture as different and not deficient.

The college composition instructor of blacks would also be wise to know something about black English, and where to draw answers to problems. J. L. Dillard's book Lexicon of Black English (New York, 1977. Seabury Press), is an excellent resource book. The author discusses the social significance of a lexicon for black English vernacular, and terminology used by blacks in their social, cultural, and business lives. He concludes with an interesting analysis of the question: "Can we trust Literary sources as viable tools of instruction for writers who are black?" The conclusion drawn is only a firm maybe, but it is followed by practical answers on how certain literary sources may be used to advantage in teaching college composition to minority students.

Dillard espouses the cause of the instructor who would like to analyze the cognitive deficit theory. His book would be a valuable asset to also understand the "verbal deprivation" tag given to black students. Even though Dillard and Smitherman disagree with each other, this book will help the instructor better understand black English in order to better analyze Smitherman's controversial approach to the language of black America.

Espousing the bi-dialectical theorist is a Halsted Press book by William S. Hall and Ray O. Freedle. It is entitled Culture and Language. The Black American Experience. This book explores, in a unique manner, language experience in standard and non-standard English. As Klaus F. Riegel, of the University of Michigan, describes it: "It is addressed both to problems of language use and to investigation of research issues. It aims at an explanation of language differences and at an understanding of language difficulties. The authors succeeded in relating language development to cognitive and social conditions." The instructor of college composition of minority students will find this book stimulating, with many practical ideas about holistic cultures and subcultures, sociolinguistics, intellectual functioning problem-solving and culture fair tests, and the importance of "self-concept" and its effect on black identity. The use of this book gives the instructor a better understanding of the bi-dialectical theory. It also helps instructors deal with language and dialect not as an absolute dividing line, but rather as a possible cohesive means to improve writing skills.

Another resourceful book for teaching college composition to minority students is a Delta original by Paul Stoller. This book, Black American English. Its Background and Its Use in the Schools and in Literature, is practical. It will help the instructor understand and analyze the verbal deprivation theory. In conjunction with Dillard's book The Lexicon of Black English, it should provide answers to the terminology of black English and dialect. Articles of particular interest are: "The Logic of Non-Standard English" by William Labov, and Roger W. Shuy's article "Teacher Training and Urban Language Problems." These two articles were singled out for their practicality in helping instructors understand the issues and problems facing the teacher of minority students as they write.

Teaching college composition to minority students presents many problems, and what I have discussed in theory, practice and resources, is not meant as a cure-all. The most important thing to remember is that understanding black culture and black students is imperative. Also, keep after the students to be proficient, for with it comes a sense of pride that leads to accomplishment. We are well aware that only a few instructors have been taught to teach writing, and that many might rather teach other English classes than be burdened with teaching composition. To this may be added that fewer teachers expect or want to teach minority students and especially a class of blacks. Teaching college composition to minority students may be likened to an article entitled: "Freshman Composition: The Right Texts, but the Wrong Students Walk in the Door " (Dorothy Ginn 1976).

The challenge is ever present. It is a challenge to use a humanistic approach to teaching, and it is a challenge to be in constant communication with the student. And the final challenge for the instructor is not to judge. For if we are judicial, we are weakened and made less effective. The non-judicial instructor finds success in teaching black students, if heed is paid to Leo Strauss' motto: "Always assume, that there is one silent student in your class, who is by far, superior to you in head and heart."

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